



Appalachian Mountain Club

Good morning, thank you for the opportunity to speak you today. My name is Kristen Sykes and I am the Highlands Advocate for the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC).

Today I would like to speak to you about the Mid-Atlantic Highlands and the importance of the farm bill in protecting the Highlands.

A surprising natural landscape, the Mid-Atlantic Highlands is a region of forest, farmland, and rugged hills spanning 3.5 million acres from northwest Connecticut, through New York, New Jersey to South-central Pennsylvania.

The Highlands Region has been recognized as a nationally significant region by the USDA Forest Service and Congress through two studies of the NY-NJ Highlands and enactment of the Highlands Conservation Act in November of last year. Currently the USDA Forest Service is studying the Pennsylvania and Connecticut Highlands. Interestingly it was through the 1990 farm bill that the first NY-NJ Highlands Study began.

The AMC believes that the USDA should use the upcoming farm bill reauthorization to help conserve threatened forests and farmlands in the Highlands and to assist private landowners with stewardship of these lands. With at least 110,000 acres of farmland lost to development in the NY/NJ Highlands and 7,000 acres of farmland a year lost in Connecticut this funding could not come soon enough. Programs such as the WHIP and CRP programs should be continued and have their funding increase.

However, equally important are forestlands. Forests provide important ecosystem services like clean air, clean water, wildlife habitat, and serve as a soil bank for high-value soils. The Farm Bill can plan a large role in protecting the forests of the Highlands. The next Farm bill must have a major emphasis on forests as well as farmlands, including a separate Forestry Title to ensure that these programs receive adequate attention. The Forest Legacy Program is a critical tool to help states conserve private forests, but current funding levels are well short of identified needs. The Forest Legacy program needs to be authorized at a level of \$300 million simply to cover the existing needs. The legacy program should also have more flexibility regarding who can hold easements.

There should be more funding & more flexibility to assist Communities in reaching their conservation & stewardship goals regarding forests. There isn't currently enough money available for municipal forests and many cost-share programs are not available to them. The proposed Suburban and Community Forestry and Open Space Program would provide an important complement to the Forest Legacy program and we encourage you to include this the upcoming farm bill.

In closing the AMC believes the USDA should make it a priority to protect the farmland and forests of the Mid-Atlantic Highlands by providing an increase in funds to protect farmland and as well as should prioritize the conservation and stewardship of forests, soils, and wildlife habitat.

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